

# Telling the Board's Story Through the Co-op Marketing Department

BY REBECCA TORPIE

**C**o-op boards and marketing teams can be like two ships passing in the night.

Chances are they've crossed paths during election season and annual meeting planning, but contact beyond that can be very limited. At many co-ops, neither the board nor the marketing team truly understands the other's role or perspective, and this can lead to misunderstandings, haphazard planning and execution, and poor board communication to the membership.

Recently, board-to-owner communication at more than a few co-ops has been a struggle, and I have heard many directors say they find strategically connecting with owners to be a challenge. And as grocery competition ramps up, there is added pressure on the co-op's marketing department to leverage its thin resources to stay in the game.

## Adding board voice in the marketing plan

Under the general manager's direction, creating space in the annual marketing plan for board voice and content can offer the marketing department a structured way to execute board communications. Doing so will optimize the board voice by utilizing the skills and creative talents of the marketing staff, who can integrate it into the overall marketing strategy at key points in time throughout the year.

When the time comes to develop the marketing plan, the marketing team can work with the board contact person to help design a calendar of board-owner communications. Use the board calendar as a content guide for what the board will communicate to the membership over the course of the year. The marketing team can then coordinate that with what they are planning.

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However, when the relationship between the board and marketing team is solid and structured, both can help each other help the co-op. The board has an ally in marketing, with its creative instincts and professional resources used to amplify the board's voice and help tell the co-op's stories in cohesive, inspired ways. For the marketing department, using the board's voice as a communication tool can serve as a new angle that natural foods and grocery competitors just can't touch—the cooperative as an alternative economic model and a powerful differentiator.

## Laying groundwork

For the board, appreciating the role of the marketing team is the first step to developing a good relationship with them! The marketing team is being pulled in many different directions at all times—likely they are in a constant tug-of-war getting content from store staff on time, putting on events, and perhaps managing the customer service or membership desk. Board communication may not be a high priority list unless it is already part of the formal marketing or communications plan.

The general manager should be the initial relationship-builder between the board and marketing, but the ultimate aim should be to help the two groups develop ways of communicating with each other so the workflow is smooth and uncomplicated. The general manager can help set parameters for communication that give the marketing team the authority that it needs to maintain brand standards, while opening more communication channels so board needs are met. The general manager and marketing can create and enforce standards for board content submissions, such as deadlines, formats, social media rules, etc., and the board can designate one director as the point of contact to the marketing manager.

By looking at all of these—sometimes competing—events and communications together, the plan can address where the board voice plugs into the bigger picture to create the most compelling, cohesive narrative. Then sort, prioritize, and integrate all communications accordingly. As a group, work together to weave board stories into the store, membership, and outreach stories so that they support one another wherever possible.

The board's voice can add a layer of rich communication content to provide opportunities for the marketing team to creatively engage with owners. But it is key that marketing understands what the board does and how they do it, so they're able to package it for maximum effectiveness. A general manager asking their marketing manager to attend board meetings, or to get involved in policy monitoring prep, are great ways to gain a better understanding of board process and goals—and why the board voice is a critical part of the co-op story as a whole. See also Michael Healy's earlier article, "Measuring Our Ends, Telling Our Story": (<http://www.grocer.coop/articles/measuring-ends-telling-our-story>) on including staff in defining and measuring ends impact.

## Collaborate and commit


Board and marketing team collaboration on owner engagement ideas allows the relationship to evolve. Develop a short list of suggested events or communications in which the board and marketing staff can work together.

Being a board member also means being an ambassador of the co-op. Directors need to commit to being involved and present at co-op activities, which will strengthen the relationship and trust between the board and the marketing department. Offering to pour champagne on New Year's Eve day


in the store for shoppers, or to pass out samples at the local vendors' celebration, helps connect the board's work to owners and develops personal relationships. It gives directors a chance to make face-to-face contact with owners, allowing owners to ask questions and get to know directors as real people who shop at the co-op too.

### Some board tips for great storytelling

- Give the marketing manager the opportunity to present the marketing plan to the board. It's a great time to learn about the co-op's overall brand strategy. Build in time to ask questions. Bonus: directors may get some education about the ins and outs of marketing.
- Practice telling co-op stories together, as a whole. Work on how a decision will be communicated, and agree on a single storyline that everyone can remember and communicate effectively.
- Make sure that getting new, professionally produced headshot images for directors is done each year and that creating a plan for them is in the marketing plan and budget.
- Let the marketing department do what they're best at—marketing the co-op! They have the tools to help the board reach the most people in the most effective way and while staying true to the co-op's brand philosophy and strategy. □



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